

BOOK REVIEWS

Madame Menaka

Damayanti Joshi
Sangeet Natak Akademi,
New Delhi, 1989
64 pages, Rs.150

Published biographies of Indian dancers can be counted on the fingers of one hand. For that reason *Madame Menaka* by Damayanti Joshi is welcome, but only up to a point.

The core text, skipping the infiltration by pictures, does not go beyond 25 pages, which is less than an in-depth article in *Sangeet Natak*. Hence *Madame Menaka* does not qualify very much as a book.

There are seven appendices. Appendix I offers the synopses of two of Menaka's ballets. One, *Deva Vijaya Nritya*, is said to have three Scenes whereas there were only two. *Malavikagnimitram* did not have two Acts as stated but three. And why is there nothing on Menaka's other three ballets? Or on any of her several stray items—solo, duet and group—which in the manner of classical ballet in the West she preferred to call *Divertissements*? Information on this would have given a clue to the scope and range of the themes she tackled and also re-



vealed what items were in Kathak or in Kathakali or Manipuri, and what in mixed style.

Appendix II is devoted to her Itinerary in Europe from January 1936 to March 1937. If this tour covered 750 performances how does it help to learn where she appeared in the first 165 of these, with no particulars regarding the rest? And there is nothing on her tours in India, neither names of places or venues nor dates.

Appendix III carries a selection from reviews that appeared in the Press in Europe, but there is no mention that many of these are in translation. And why is there not a single review from India? Surely this would have thrown some light on the state and status of the understating and appreciation of Indian dance in those crucial years when the art was struggling to get rehabilitated. Leading papers like the *Times of India*, the *Bombay Chronicle*, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, the *Madras Mail*, the *Statesman*, the *Leader* and the *Sind Observer* carried notices and critiques on Menaka's work, and it is a great pity that this whole meaty chunk has been missed out.

Appendix IV accommodates excerpts from the Prospectus of Nrityalayam, the dance centre established by Menaka. This is rounded off with a note that what is reproduced is in the original typographic style of the Prospectus when it is not so at all.

Appendix V spells out Menaka's credo, and it is a worthwhile piece. Not that there is any comment or analysis by the author, but it does emerge that Menaka was poorly equipped to talk on dance. Her observations on Kathak and Kathakali as on *tandava* and *lasya* are ill informed. And how can one forgive Menaka, the acknowledged pioneer in the revival of Kathak, when she mentions 'Kalka Beenda' as if it was the name of one person forgetting that they were two brothers?

Appendix VI purports to be a section on Menaka's contemporaries. In the absence of any assessment of their work or contribution, more so in relation to what Menaka offered, what is the purpose served? And in any such survey

how could her towering contemporaries like Tagore, Gopinath and Achhan Maharaj have been totally ignored?

Appendix VII, titled *Reminiscence* by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, carries an extract from her Memoirs. This carries the flavour of a certificate which may have looked all right in a programme brochure but is out of place in a book. In any case, why could not the appraisal of Menaka by other respected writers on dance, such as D.G. Vyas and G. Venkatachalam, be included?

The body of the book recounts some aspects of and events in Menaka's life, and this helps. But there is far more on Menaka the person than on her dance. It was Menaka who first utilized the Kathak technique for experimentation in various ways. It is highlighted by the author that Menaka never enlisted word, lyric, dialogue or commentary in her dance. Granted, but then, in the absence of all of this, how for instance was she able to communicate the *Pada-vali* of Vidyapati which was intrinsic to her ballet *Krishna Leela*? Answers to questions such as these would have made the book more useful.

Karanas and *angaharas* are the basic dance units and phrases enunciated in the *Natya Shastra*. The author dwells upon how Menaka made the fullest use of these in Kathak. The book goes on to say: "Mimetically she drew upon the traditional *gat-bhavas* with their wealth of expressive nuances. This was the mainstay of her 'drama', the acting out of a story on stage." Now, *gat-bhava* carries only elementary mime, the nuances being left to loaded expressional pieces like the *thumri* and *bhajan*. Also, *gat-bhava* is always rendered in fast tempo. So it is difficult to conceive

how Menaka could have coped with narrative dance and its subtleties through the medium of *gat-bhava*.

There are several inaccuracies in the text. The Bharata Natyam devadasi in the Baroda durbar (page 10) was not Gaurabai but Gowri; there was another dancer Gaurabala, professing Kathak, but she was not attached to the palace. The gurus of Manipuri were Naba Kumar Singh and Narendra Kumar Singh, not Naba Kumar Sinha and Narendra Kumar Sinha (p. 11). Anna Pavlova could not have attended the opening of *Krishna Leela* in Bombay in 1934 (p. 12) for she had passed away in 1931. The music for *Malavikagnimitram* (p. 15) was composed by Ramchandra Ganguli, not Harish Chandra Bali. The principal music director Ambika Charan Majumdar's name was never given as such (p. 14) but as Ambique Majumdar.

Page 16 lists 15 solo, duet and group dances and adds that these were set to the ragas *Gunkali*, *Yaman*, *Mand-Behag* and *Kafi*. Only *Patang* was in *Gunkali*, *Gramya Goshti* in *Yaman*, *Mangala Prabhat* in *Mand-Behag* and *Holi* in *Kafi*; the rest had different ragas. In listing Menaka's musicians (p. 19), a number of names have been left out. These include Mohammad Umar Khan (*sarod*), Ramchandra Ganguli (*sitar*), Gopal Phadke (*tabla tarang*), Nisar Ali (*shehnai*), Brahmdukt (*gongs*) and Gopal Pannikar (*chenda*). A more glaring neglect is the name of the Manipuri artiste Bipin Singh; it is because of Menaka that he went to Bombay, and apart from dancing in her team he created a number of dances for her.

On page 27 it is stated: "Uday Shankar's choreography was free of any one

classical style: Madame Menaka's on the other hand, despite innovation and experiment, belonged to the realm of Kathak." Neither was the work of that genius, Uday Shankar, a melange of classical styles, nor did Menaka stick to Kathak alone. Mark her own words about her most ambitious production *Malavikagnimitram*: "The main characteristic of this ballet is that the classical dance techniques of India—Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri—are used in the same ballet."

The design of the book and the production quality are refreshing. The photographs are well placed, though not with much variation. It would have added to their value if credits had been given. This would have also resurrected the names of Berko and Stan Harding, who were among the most sought-after photographers for dance in those days.

Most puzzling is the title of the book. Why the prefix Madame? In her professional life as dancer there is not a single instance where she has been referred to as Madame Menaka. All along she has been known, publicized and written about only and simply as Menaka.* From where did the author get the impression (p. 12) that with the production of Menaka's first ballet *Krishna Leela* in 1934 she assumed the stage name Madame Menaka?

For all the flaws and lacunae, one cannot perhaps quarrel too much with the author. As per the blurb on the book jacket, Damayanti Joshi was born in 1932 and she left Menaka two years before her death in 1947. This means that Damayanti Joshi was exposed to the work and art of Menaka when Damayanti Joshi was under 13 years of age. Surely these are tender years and

she could not have been able to truly understand and appreciate, leave aside assess, the great contribution of Menaka.

Madame Menaka can be accepted as no more than a tentative effort. Menaka was a leading pioneer in the reinstatement of Indian dance in those tricky 1930s. A reliable work on her is a must, and it is to be hoped that one with the requisite ability and perspicacity will surface soon to take this up.

MOHAN KHOKAR

NOTE

* Leila Roy's father was a Calcutta barrister and her mother was English. She married Captain Sahib Singh Sokhey of the Indian Medical Service and subsequently adopted Menaka as her stage name.

The Music of Bharatanatyam

Jon B. Higgins

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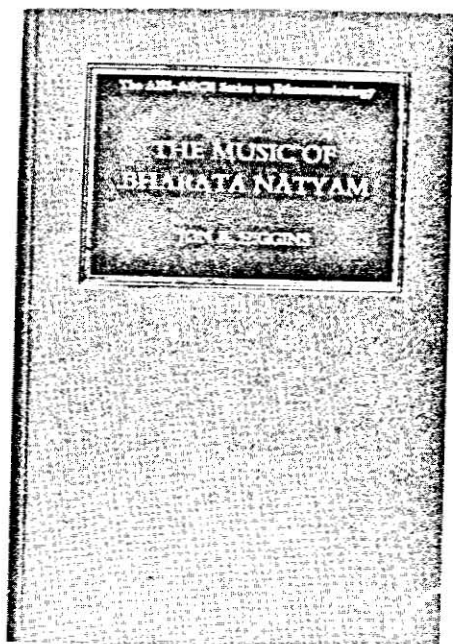
Oxford and IBH Publishing Co., 1993
(i-xxiii + 392) Pages, Rs. 595

If, in the last fifty years, the dance styles of India that conform to the needs of what the term 'classical' implies have enhanced their own status and that of the country, credit for such an attainment is glibly ascribed to and readily taken by governmental agencies—a continuation of the royal patronage of yester years. However, if one were to seek an answer to the higher (or, lower)

rank assigned to a particular style, offered usually are vague generalities and subjective feelings.

It is in this context that Jon Higgins eminently deserves to be read. The twenty-year old Jon was already trained in Western music when he witnessed a dance programme of Bharatanatyam by Balasaraswati at the Jacob Pillow Festival in Massachusetts: if it proved a turning point in his career, it also emerged as a productive cultural event of international significance. Jon's study of Carnatic music led him through a Ph.D. at the Wesley University; what is more, his close association with Balasaraswati and her brother, Viswanathan, was such as to warrant his dedication of 'The music of Bharatanatyam' to both of them. The book is a study in depth of the subtleties that inform and inspire Bharatanatyam, thanks to the artistic tradition in which it finds itself alive.

Scholarship, of the academic kind, is wont to trace tradition to Bharata's 'Natyasastra'. However, among those who are sensitive to the vitality of the tradition, it is the orally transmitted inner truths that convey aesthetic insight. Balasaraswati is on record as having said, in her later years, to one of her admirers: 'You think it is the dance? It is the music; listen carefully.' Beryl de Zoete wrote in 1938: 'The dancing body is but another instrument of music, and the idea of music as a mere accompaniment to dancing is utterly foreign to Indian and indeed to Eastern ideas as a whole.' (*The other mind, a study of dance in South India*). He goes on to say: 'Complete understanding of this extraordinary and felicitous marriage of music and dance, the one a source of life for the other, will quite possibly never



again be as fully realised as it is today in the person of Balasaraswati'. Appropriately, Jon recalls 'the centuries of symbiotic relationship between music and dance' which stands underlined in the definition of *sangita* as the blend of *gitam*, *vādyam* and *nrityam*.

How Jon proceeds to show the 'felicitous marriage' of music and dance makes his book unique. The value of the text is enhanced by two devices: a couple of audio-cassettes that are meant to be heard alongside the written text matter and—his own invention—block notation, 'a visual improvement over the *swara* notation'. Thus it is that Jon, described by T. Viswanathan as 'the only non-Indian to achieve a level of professional performance competence in Karnatak vocal music', succeeds in portraying the aesthetic features of Bharatanatyam. The audio-visual de-

vices underline the unique features that lend excellence when a sensitive dancer seeks to communicate with a sensitive viewer. The recording of rhythmic syllables (*sollukattu*) rendered by Ganesa, son of Balasaraswati's *guru*, Kandappa Pillai, lends further value. If Jon did not record the pure dance (*nritya*) compositions of Kandappa himself, it was because he could not; Balasaraswati herself had stipulated that such personal knowledge should not be disseminated widely.

However, it is gratifying to hear Jon's own voice rendering, with rich felicity, so many of the treasured songs that make Bharatanatyam what it uniquely is. I have in mind the *padams*, beginning with Kshetragana's 'Inta moham emirā...' in Sankarabharanam. The manner in which Jon draws attention to the unusual but charming usage in Sahāna raga, while commenting on Sarangapani's *padam*, 'Magudocci...' reflects his insight. Ghanam Krishna Iyer's *padam* in Kambhoji, 'Padari varuhudu...' offers Jon the opportunity to emphasise the melodic accent on the *swara da* 'to create a sustained feeling of continuity'. Recognising that "few *padams* actually conform with any consistency to the classification system", Jon proceeds to highlight the charm of Ghanam Krishna Iyer's other *padam*, 'Nittiraiyil...' in Pantuvarali, set to *ādi tāla*. Drawing attention to the *charanam* of this *padam*, he says: "This unusually beautiful and sensually provocative description is presented as the mental fabrication of a jealous woman." As a portrait of the *sāmānya nāyikā*, Jon has recorded his own rendering of the *padam* in Bilahari raga, 'Intaku galigite....'. That this piece was not part of

the repertoire for dance is evident from the tempo, much faster than the usual pace of the earlier *padams*. It is confirmed by the foot-note on page 163, stating that Balasaraswati taught this song to Jon, though "she does not dance this piece". Jon comments incisively: "The verbal subtlety and spiritual overtones present in most of *padam* literature is conspicuously absent in this composition."

Speaking of the moment when Balasaraswati herself sings while rendering *abhinaya* for a *padam*, Jon refers to 'extra-ordinary levels of imagery'. He adds: "Here, more than anywhere else, one is drawn forcibly to recall the special anguish of separation from those one loves or has loved; it is to longer possible to experience the plight of a stage-bound *nāyikā* independently of one's own isolation and essential aloneness. Man was born to loneliness and it is in the power of Balasaraswati's gift to remind us of the price he pays for his individuality." The power of such music finds reiteration in the concluding chapter, 'The artistic progression': "The music of Bharatanatyam is more than an accompaniment to the dance; it is the principal source of the dance. The artistic progression which unfolds within this repertoire is designed to exploit the dynamic relationships between music and dance, and ultimately to expose their essential union."

This book of Jon Higgins succeeds in bringing out that 'essential union', thanks to the inventive use of block notation as supplementary to *swara* notation. It is, indeed, 'a visual improvement over the *swara* notation from which it is derived'. Every *rasika* who reads this book cannot but compli-

ment the Committee on Ethnomusicology on its decision to honour Jon Higgins who did so much 'both as a performer and a scholar, for the cause of Indian music.'

K. S. SRINIVASAN

In Search of Aesthetics for The Puppet Theatre

By Michael Meschke in collaboration with Margareta Sorenson; Translation from Swedish by Susanna Stevens

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Rs. 300

"To be intellectually and emotionally alive means to be curious, continually growing persons. We need teachers, models to whom we can relate in a constantly ongoing process that is sometimes affectionate, sometimes rebellious. Our engagement for or against various teachers, theories, movements of ideas reflects our own problems, for each artist fights a battle with his own existence, as he works. The battle concerns his very identity as an artist, as an individual and a part of a larger sphere."

MICHAEL MESCHKE

This is one of the most readable books on puppetry and related arts one has come across in a long time. The author has a wealth of experience and practical information, from his career of more than 30 years with the Marionette Theatre of Stockholm, Sweden, and his work before that as a solo artist.

Meschke's ideas are universal and very important in creating a dramatic

character. His vocabulary is wide and lucid. He says: 'The work process requires adopting an -unconditioned approach to the puppet theatre instrument, and mastering all of its techniques. The purpose of being unconditioned is to obtain as much freedom as possible in the face of every new goal that arises'. Meschke explains this as a sort of 'zero state' we should start from in order to communicate our intention with the greatest artistic efficiency.

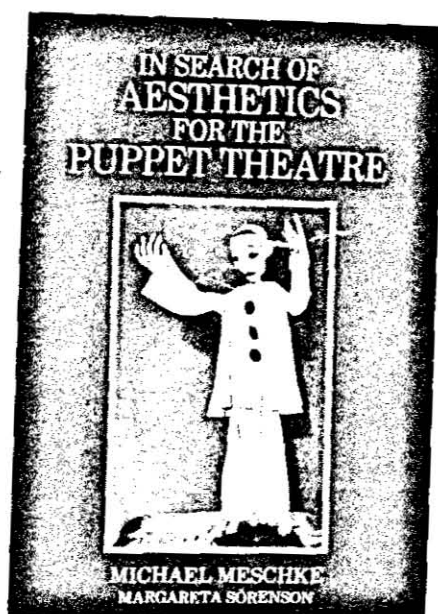
Meschke repeatedly affirms: 'Puppetry is a means and not an end in itself'. Unfortunately most puppeteers around the world tend to treat it as an end. This does not conduce to the flourishing of the art.

The first part of the book deals with creating the puppet figure, the character, direction of the eyes, various puppet techniques and the meaning of Tradition and Innovation.

The very term puppet is pregnant with images of a visual theatre. One of the most important aspects of the puppet are its eyes, and the author offers a lot for puppet-makers and players to learn from. Meschke has categorised different emotions for the guidance of contemporary puppeteers.

Today the major part of the world where puppetry—traditional puppetry—is practised is Asia. The chapter on tradition and innovation which many of us the world over are involved with, is much too short. The author says in a few lines: 'Tradition is the soil in which the living artist plants new flowers. In order for these to grow, the old soil must be constantly ploughed up and replenished with new nutrition. And the water of life comes from outside.'

The chapters of the book defining the



players and movement are its strong points. As we read them it is evident that the ideas are related to Meschke's own productions done in various techniques and styles. And however much the author impresses upon us the value of the 'zero state' approach and a fresh look at each creation, the individual's style is bound to dominate. Meschke has created an eloquent style of his own and enriched puppet theatre with it. The pictures in the book illustrate his refined artistic qualities.

The latter part of the work, encompassing space and scene, design and dramaturgy, generalise the questions far too much. Again, some of the sketches illustrating threads and the points of attachment to rods could confuse the beginner. The book nevertheless is a must for all puppeteers and theatre

persons. We need more books on puppetry with a world view such as Michael Meschke's. Our thanks therefore to IGNCA and Sterling Publishers for bringing out this English translation,

though it could do without the many printing errors.

DADI D. PUDUMJEE